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What We Know About the Basic Course: What Has the Research Told Us?

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The teaching of the basic course, a long and honorable tradition within the speech communication discipline, has been the mainstay of our discipline. The beginning of the basic course has its roots in rhetorical tradition and primarily in training of public speaking. King notes that "the course in public speaking is historically of the prime reasons for the birth and development of departments (of speech communication) and continues to be one of our most important offerings" (143). The Gibson, Gruner, Brooks, and Petrie 1970 survey of the basic communication course concludes that regardless of the title or stated emphasis, the content centers around public speaking, and the Gibson, Gruner, Hanna, Smythe, and Hayes 1980 survey found that over 51 percent of the responding institutions have a public speaking emphasis and at least 40 percent of the remaining 49 percent have a combination course which includes some public speaking. The Gibson, Hanna, and Huddleston 1985 survey indicates a slight increase in the public speaking emphasis to 54 percent. During the same period the Gibson, et al. survey found that the hybrid or fundamentals course fell from 40 percent of the total in 1980 to 34 percent in 1985.

Seiler, Foster, and Pearson in their 1985 survey went beyond the Gibson, et al. studies and surveyed not only the basic course but all other large enrollment courses taught by Departments of Speech. Seiler, et al. found that only 26 percent of those surveyed labeled their basic course exclusively a public speaking course, 55 percent a

fundamentals course, and 19 percent both a public speaking and fundamentals course. Although there are sampling problems with both studies because of low returns, the Seiler, et al. study may be less valid because they received approximately 9 percent fewer returns than did Gibson, et al.

The problem with most of the information that has been collected by recent surveys has been in the definition — that is how the basic course is defined. During a recent conference sponsored by the Midwest Directors of the Basic Course there were approximately 45 directors from a variety of universities and colleges in which the issue of what is the basic course was discussed. No agreement could be reached as to what the basic course is or what course best represents it. It seems that before a survey or any research regarding the basic course can be done there needs to be a common operational definition of it. It is often described as the largest beginning (first) speech course. Although it is not the purpose of this paper to discuss definition as to what the basic course is or isn't — it is, however, important to realize that what we do know about the basic course is really not very meaningful because few can agree as to what it is. It seems that the basic communication course is a course, any course, in which the fundamentals of speech are taught. It is a course in which skills in communicating are the primary objective.

The purpose of this essay is to review the literature related to the basic course to determine what we know about it. To accomplish this purpose we (1) identify the base of knowledge upon which the basic course is organized; (2) examine what this base of knowledge tells us about designing and organizing the course; and (3) identify future research areas which should provide direction for the study of the effectiveness of the basic course.

The Base of Knowledge About the Basic Speech Communication Course

Since the basic speech communication course continues to be a vital aspect of any speech communication curriculum

one might assume that its organization is based on a coherent theory and an extensive body of empirical research. There is, however, no support in the existing literature for such an assumption. Contemporary approaches to the organization of the basic course (i.e., public speaking) have grown primarily out of a confluence of a rich and varied rhetorical tradition, the accumulated experiences of teachers and a limited corpus of empirical research.

The Rhetorical Tradition represents a consistent thread of emphasis in the study, teaching, and practice of the basic course. Since classical times, rhetoric has been viewed as either synonymous with public speaking or closely related to it. Any attempt to summarize the vastness of the rhetorical tradition is sketchy at best, but a brief overview illustrates the role it has played in shaping the organization of and teaching in the contemporary speech communication class.

Experience, recognized as an essential aspect of effective instruction, has also influenced the organization of the basic course. Jeffrey and Peterson note that "the best teachers undoubtedly are those who rely upon their inspiration, experience, and imagination for assignments particularly well suited to the group of students they are teaching" (1-2). Teachers can rely both on their own experience and on the shared experience of others.

Research. While most of what we know about the basic course is based on tradition and experience, some research derived knowledge is available to the director of the basic course. Empirical research has been emphasized since the early days of the Association of Academic Teachers of Public Speaking. Winans and the Research Council in 1915 proclaimed the merits of teaching and practice founded on an elaborated research bases. This emphasis has continued to some measure in the present.

Hayworth in 1939 through 1942 reports the results of a massive study of five institutions and as many as 55 people on the effectiveness of public speaking instruction. This research measured 52 different aspects of public speaking including components of student delivery, time spent on different class activities, student impressions of their speech performances, and student background characteristics.

Using these measures, a number of different aspects of course organization were investigated such as the length of the term, morning and afternoon classes, direct and indirect methods of teaching, and the use of memorized and extemporaneous speeches.

Thompson in 1967 summarized quantitative research in speech communication and included a list of generalizations concerning the teaching of public speaking derived from research including the role of rewards, the presentation of information, and the use of direct instruction. Other researchers have examined aspects of public speaking courses such as the impact of different instructional strategies and the use of video-tape in the public speaking classroom. Little research, however, has examined the effectiveness of instruction and practice in developing students' competence (Trank & Steele).

Although tradition, experience, and research have provided teachers with the knowledge used to organize and teach the basic course, we still do not know very much empirically of what works and what does not in teaching students in the basic course.

Theory and Performance

The ratio of theory to performance is the first question usually addressed by those organizing the basic course. In actual practice, the organization of the basic course appears to be weighted toward performance over theory. The latest Gibson et al. 1985 survey indicates the following theory/performance ratios: approximately 14 percent of those surveyed indicate a 20/80 split, 26 percent indicated a 30/70 split, 25 percent a 50/50 split, and 15 percent a 60/40 split between theory and performance. It is interesting to note that in 1980 the ratio of 50/50 or higher toward theory was only 23 percent while in 1985 this type of split accounts for 34 percent of those surveyed. Thus, while there is a thrust toward skills and performance more theory is being taught in the basic course. This difference or trend could be accounted for in the way Gibson, et al. define theory —

“teacher method (lecture/discussion, exams and their discussion, or film)” and performance as “students overtly involved in giving speeches, debating, involved in dialogue, etc.” (284).

Empirical support for the division of the basic course into theory and practice components can be found in our literature. Faules, Littlejohn, and Ayres in a test of three different approaches to the course found that students in a performance-oriented course had a significantly higher rate of improvement in their speaking skills than did students who only received theory. In fact, the students in the theory-taught courses were not significantly different in effective speaking skills from students who had received no instruction in communication.

Although a combination of theory and performance is favored, practiced and supported by research, we have no basis in our research literature on what is the most effective ratio of theory to performance. Thus, the decision is left to each individual teacher or director as to what they believe is best for students.

Number, Length, Nature, and Order of Performances

In 1980 Gibson, et al. reported that 68% of the schools reporting had between 4 and 6 performance and 23% between 7 and 10 performances. The 1985 survey's results indicates 70% of those responding had between 1 and 5 performances; 16% reported 7 to 10 performances; 4% reported more than 10 performances. While the data support teaching public speaking — it also tends to show a decline in the number of performances per course.

There is only one study which had been done to examine the number and length of speaking performances. Gardner in his study divided 36 minutes of speaking time into four different conditions — one group gave 12 three minute speeches; a second group gave 6 six minute speeches; a third group gave 2 speeches of 3 minutes, 2 of 6 minutes and 2 of 9 minutes in length; and a fourth group gave 4 speeches of 9

minutes each. All groups did show significant speaking improvement from the pretest to the posttest. There was, however, no significant difference between groups. Thus, the number and length of speeches appear to produce no statistical difference in students' speaking skills development. It was found, however, that students were more satisfied with fewer speaking assignments even though the time limits may have been increased.

The type of speech presentation, i.e., impromptu, extemporaneous or manuscript as well as the general purpose to inform, entertain, or persuade had not been researched. Thus, it is not known which type or purpose provides the most benefit to the students. Further topic selection techniques and strategies to provide students with speaking assignments are plentiful but none have been researched to indicate which may or may not be the best.

Existing literature does not provide us with sufficient information to provide guidelines to the teacher or director of the basic course as to the number and length of student performance assignments. Most of the information related to assignments and assignment length can be found in instructor's manuals — these, however, are not consistent nor is there any empirical support for any particular approach.

Optimally Effective Performances

Another question concerning performance in the basic course is: How can performance be made optimally effective for the student? A traditional response is for students to practice and that practice makes perfect. Although practice can help students develop their skills, practice without some form of feedback may do little more than reinforce ineffective behaviors.

Providing students with evaluation and critiques of their performances has consistently been a part of basic course instruction. The problem that confronts basic course instructors is which type of critique is best, what specific comments should be given on the critique, and how should

the critique be presented? There has been some significant work done by Sprague and Young on the type of critique statements an instructor makes but there still is little known about which specific critique comments help students the most to improve their speaking abilities.

Technological advances in audio-visual equipment especially the video camera and recorder (camcorder) have potential for aiding students in improving their communication skills. Research using video recording has indicated that video-taping students' speeches improved student satisfaction with the basic course (Bradely); combining video-tape playback with a teacher critique can improve speaking effectiveness (Diehl, Breen, & Larson; McCroskey & Lashbrook); allowing students to video-tape performances until they are satisfied and then presenting the tape for criticism rather than live presentations produced significant differences in student attendance, attitude, and evaluation of the instructor (Goldhaber and Kline); and allowing the presence of the video-tape recorder during student performance did not affect student anxiety, exhibitionism, or reticence (Bush, Bittner, and Brooks).

Methods of Instruction

A central concern of the instructor or course director is the method of instruction for the course. Methods used in the basic course include the traditional lecture and discussion as well as alternative methods such as exercises (Jones; Weaver), Personalized System of Instruction — PSI (Seiler; Seiler and Fuss-Reineck; Heun, Heun, and Ratcliff; Scott and Young; Gray, Buerkel-Rothfuss, and Yerby) and other mastery approaches (Stanton-Spicer and Bassett), programmed instruction (Amato; Hanna), and learning contracts (King; Stelzner; Stern). Such approaches are derived from learning theory and instructional design as well as practical experience in the classroom.

Amato, in comparing programmed instruction with video-taped lectures, found the programmed instruction methods to be more effective for teaching public speaking.

Cheatham and Jordan compared three approaches (1) a mass lecture by a faculty member with graduate assistants leading discussion sessions in which students gave speeches, (2) a team approach with a faculty member who presented the lectures and lead one discussion session for half of the class and a graduate assistant who lead the other discussion session, and (3) a traditional approach in which a faculty member lectured and evaluated student speeches. There was no significant differences in the overall achievement among the three approaches, but the students in the traditional approach had a higher average score on the midterm examination and they were rated higher on their final speech than students in the team approach.

Seiler in comparing traditional and Personalized System of Instruction (PSI) taught sections of the basic course in terms of cost effectiveness and student satisfaction, found the PSI sections to be significantly less costly and higher in student satisfaction. In an other study Gray, Buerkel-Rothfuss and Yerby comparing PSI to traditional taught sections in four areas (1) attitudes toward and satisfaction with the course, (2) academic achievement in the course, (3) communication apprehension, and (4) growth in communication skills. The findings suggest that the PSI approach tends to equal, or, most often, be more effective than the traditional approach in all four areas.

Conclusion and Proposal for Future Research

Our examination of basic course literature reveals that instructors and directors do not have sufficient empirical support on which to design the course. The basic course is organized similar to the way it was organized when the speech was established as an academic discipline, that is, it is organized and disigned for the most part on tradition and experience rather than theory or research. The net result is that we do not know what is the most effective approach to organizing and teaching the basic course.

A Proposal For the Future

Our purpose is not to debunk tradition and experience or to advocate that a theory based on empirical research will lead to a different organization in the basic course. Instead, we discovered that most of what we do in the basic course is the result of habit or tradition: "we have always done it that way."

The goal of teachers and directors of the basic course should not be merely to perpetuate tradition and build experience. Rather, our goal should be to teach speech in a way which is effective and which can ensure that our students learn the principles and concepts of speech communication — theory and practice. At the present time we have little assurance that we are accomplishing this goal effectively or efficiently.

Our proposal for the future is that we develop an on-going systematic program of research in which scholars investigate the effectiveness of the basic course. There are many questions yet unanswered and thus the best starting point is to begin with what we know from the previous research and build upon it. The research questions should reflect an interest in what makes the basic course successful and academically sound. We know that the previous research has suffered from methodological problems which restrict their utility. We now possess more sophisticated research designs and statistical procedures thus allowing for replication and new innovative research into the basic course.

Unfortunately, calls for future research such as ours are customary and a relatively easy way to conclude a paper. We feel, however, that the research we call for is desperately needed to face the questions of accountability, to justify what we do and why we do it, and to help us determine what is the best way or ways to teach the basic course.

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